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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 LJUBLJANA 000763

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV SI

SUBJECT: SLOVENIAN GOVERNMENT WORKING TO RESOLVE DIFFICULT ROMA ISSUE

REF: A. LJUBLJANA 747

1B. LJUBLJANA 719

Classified By: COM for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. The Government of Slovenia continues to struggle to resolve the issue of relocating 30 members of a Roma family displaced from their home in late October by protests from neighboring villagers (reftel a). Government missteps in the search for a resolution have caused several prominent leaders to pay a public price over the past few weeks -- Minister of Education Milan Zver resigned his position as Chair of the Government's Commission on Roma, new Mayor of Ljubljana Zoran Jankovic backed away from an initiative to house the Roma family in the capital, and the Ljubljana Chief of Police lost his job. While the government takes hits from nearly all sides on the issue, some observers including a key Roma leader, Jozek Horvat Muc, maintain that this case is a poor one to use as an example of the government's treatment of the Roma community, highlighting that there are over 100 criminal complaints pending against members of the Strojan family and calling this a problem with one family, not the entire Roma community. Regardless, international pressure is mounting and criticism of the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner (reftel b) continues to echo as the problem heads into its fifth week. Government officials are clearly struggling to find a solution, even with what Prime Minister Janez Jansa calls a "massive effort" to find a suitable location for the permanent resettlement of the Strojan family. END SUMMARY.

- - - - - MISSED DEADLINES, HIGH LEVEL RESIGNATIONS PLAGUE ROMA SITUATION - - - - -

12. (C) As many expected, the GoS missed its self-imposed deadline for a solution to relocate the 30 members of the Roma family Strojan no later than Sunday, November 19th. The deadline came and went with some fanfare however, as the failure to secure a permanent solution led main government spokesman on the issue Milan Zver, the Minister of Education and the Chair of the Slovenian Government Commission for the Protection of the Roma Ethnic Community, to offer his resignation from the Commission. Leaders from the Slovenian Roma Association and the Roma Councilor's Forum reiterated their support for Zver and said that there was no need to remove him as head of the commission. Prime Minister Jansa has not accepted the resignation and Zver continues to lead the process looking for a solution. Speaking during a roundtable on Roma issues on November 22nd, Zver talked about the difficulties in demanding integration from different communities while also trying to protect their autonomy and culture, and echoed previous statements from Prime Minister Jansa that the intense media coverage has fueled the fire of

the dispute and portrayed Slovenia in an inaccurate light.

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PARTIES LOOK TO LJUBLJANA FOR POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS
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¶3. (C) As continuing community protests made the likelihood of a return to the municipality of Ivancna Gorica increasingly less likely, Minister Zver and the government negotiators on the issue reached out to other municipalities looking for assistance. Initially it seemed that relocation to Ljubljana might work, and during COM's first courtesy call on the new Mayor of Ljubljana, Zoran Jankovic, on November 22nd, Jankovic said that he had just spent an hour talking about the Roma's situation with Minister Zver, and that he thought Ljubljana would be able to help. He told COM that the Strojan family looked at four locations within the city and chose the location that was "slightly isolated." Jankovic said that the City was planning a meeting with community representatives on Tuesday, November 28th, to get their approval of the plan, and after that, to formally offer the land to the Strojan family. Mirko Strojan, a representative of the family, told the press they were enthusiastic about the Mayor's offer of assistance.

¶4. (C) In public statements the Mayor said that the Strojan family should have an opportunity to live in Ljubljana, but only if a location is found that is acceptable to both the family and the local residents. This proved to be a problem, and Jankovic gave up his efforts on Friday, November 24th after roughly 200 citizens of Ljubljana's Sostro neighborhood mounted protests on Thursday and Friday against the possibility of the Roma family moving into their neighborhood. Jankovic expressed frustration and disappointment to the media that the process had gotten ahead

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of itself when someone leaked information to locals before the proposal had been brought to the neighborhood council. He also criticized the national government for not attending the emergency Friday neighborhood meeting to help convince locals to accept the Strojan family. Media reported that Jankovic's efforts to win over the crowd failed and that there was "loud cheering" when he announced at the end of the meeting that he would not force the relocation to Sostro against the will of local residents. The Roma issue appears to have been too divisive for the new Mayor to resolve in his first full week in office.

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ROMA ISSUES TAKE CENTER STAGE IN PARLIAMENT AND GOVERNMENT
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¶5. (C) Concurrent to the search for a new home for the Strojans was increasing engagement from Slovenian government officials on Roma issues. On the day of the missed deadline, President Janez Drnovsek spoke out publicly on the issue saying that any solution "must guarantee equality, justice, dignity, and safety" for both the Roma and their neighbors and calling on the police to protect all people and their property. The Monday, November 20th Parliamentary debate session was highlighted by tough commentary against Prime Minister Jansa and the government. Slovenian National Party (SNS) Head Zmago Jelincic highlighted a widely held perception that Roma are held to a different standard than the average Slovene, saying that the police do not enforce the law and that police have allowed Roma community to "do what it wants." Liberal Democracy Party (LDS) representative Majda Sirca continued that party's critical rhetoric against the current government saying that at least nine constitutional rights had been broken thus far in the government's handling of the Roma issue. Later that week, on November 23rd, the government unanimously adopted the long awaited Bill on the Roma and forwarded it to the full Slovenian Parliament for discussion (reftel a, b), coming a step closer to fulfilling an obligation set out in Slovenia's

constitution and pushing forward efforts to assist in the integration of the Roma into Slovenian society. Among other things, the bill outlines plans to create a Council of Roma to liaise with the GoS on Roma issues, requires local municipalities to address zoning issues related to Roma settlements, and creates a fund to promote the integration of Roma communities. The week concluded on Friday, November 24th, with a meeting between Prime Minister Janez Jansa and Slovenian Roma Association Head Jozek Horvat Muc to discuss the issue of the Roma in Ambrus as well as the government's recent passage of Roma legislation. According to Horvat Muc, Jansa focused on specifically the need to legalize Roma settlements (noting that 70 of the approximately 100 Roma settlements in Slovenia are illegal), and praised the Slovenian Roma Association for its good work in cooperating with the government to advance Roma issues.

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ROMA ASSOCIATION HEAD OPTIMISTIC IN MEETING WITH EMBASSY
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¶ 16. (C) Prior to his meeting with PM Jansa, Horvat Muc met with PolOff and PAO to discuss the situation and also reflect on his recent trip to the U.S. with the Department of State's International Visitor Leadership Program. Horvat Muc expressed satisfaction with the work of Minister Zver and Stanko Baluh, the head of the GoS Office for Nationalities, saying that they were doing "more than expected" to solve the problem of the Roma in Ambrus, though he criticized Minister of Environment Janez Podobnik (a member of the Slovenian People's Party or SLS) for his lack of involvement.

¶ 17. (C) In regards to the government's law on Roma, Horvat Muc said that it was generally very good, defining the responsible bodies for the implementation of the measures adopted by the GoS in 1995, including the problems of education, housing, and employment opportunities. Horvat said that this may finally jumpstart movement on the plan to help the integration of Roma, by explicitly identifying when the state and local officials are obliged to act and authorizing the state to interfere with local authorities to legalize Roma settlements if necessary. He cited Krsko as a city that has effectively dealt with the Roma issue by legalizing the settlement with the help of the state.

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A ROMA PROBLEM OR A STROJAN FAMILY PROBLEM?
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¶ 18. (C) Horvat Muc also brought up a difficult topic that has largely gone unspoken in the international media, the

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criminal reputation of the Strojan family. While the government takes hits from nearly all sides for its poor treatment of the Strojan family (and in turn the Roma community in general), many observers maintain that the real problem is with the members of the Strojan family, not animosity towards all Roma. Prime Minister Jansa briefly mentioned this during the Parliamentary debate on November 20th highlighting that there are currently over 100 criminal complaints pending against members of the Strojan family. Horvat Muc seemed to confirm this overall feeling, saying that he understood why some people would not be interested in having the Strojans as neighbors and agreeing that their behavior has, in general, not been ideal. The common "under the breath" refrain to the Roma issue in Ljubljana is a tongue in cheek comment that none of the critics would want the Strojans in their neighborhood either. The problem is significant given that the residents of Ambrus say that the Strojan family's record of behavior, not the fact that they are Roma, compounded by the local police's inability to hold the family accountable for their actions, is what led them to demand that the Strojans leave their home. Many observers in Slovenia seem to agree that the negative reputation of the Strojans further compounds the problem, and

potentially makes this case a poor one to use as an example of the government's treatment of the Roma community overall.

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STROJANS, ATTEMPTS TO GO HOME ARE MET WITH ANGRY RESISTANCE
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¶19. (C) The Strojan family, who had agreed to stay at the temporary location in Postojna "a few days" beyond the deadline, independently attempted to return to their home in Ambrus on Saturday, November 26th roughly one month after they had relocated to Postojna and one week after the government's deadline to find them a new home. The actions brought on renewed protests and construction of roadblocks from hundreds of locals in Ambrus, which in turn led to the deployment of roughly 100 police in riot gear. The Strojan family was held by police in a nearby town to avoid a direct face off with the crowd of protesters. Media coverage of the incident included pictures of protesters facing off with riot police and at least one protester who had been bloodied during the fracas. Some onlookers criticized the police's handling of the situation.

¶10. (C) Prime Minister Jansa and the Ministers of Education, Interior, and Environment as well as the Chief of Police, held an emergency meeting with the local leaders from Ambrus and Ivancna Gorica Saturday, and then met that evening with the Strojans at a highway rest area nearby the town of Visnja Gora. The Strojans decided to return to Postojna after the high level meeting convinced them a return to their home in Ambrus would not be safe. Frustration is growing on all sides of the conflict, with Mirko Strojan using the media to inform locals that he and his family were leaving Postojna to return to Ambrus, Ambrus community leader Alojz Sinkovec telling the media that locals would keep vigil on the site in case the Strojans attempted to return later that night (after they had returned to Postojna), and government ministers calling the Strojans' decision to return to Ambrus "irrational" and a move that "defied reason."

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THE BUCK STOPS WHERE? THE ROMA PROBLEM BLAME GAME BEGINS
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¶11. (C) On Monday, November 27th, the Chief of the Slovenian Police Force (a part of the Ministry of Interior) dismissed Ljubljana Police Chief Branko Slak over the police's "shortcomings" and poor handling of "information on operative measures of past events." Media speculation immediately said the firing was to scapegoat someone in the Ministry of Interior hierarchy in order to "save" Minister of Interior Dragutin Mate, saying that Slak had brought Mate to Ambrus to negotiate the dispute between the Strojan family and locals in late October and started the entire Roma mess. They opined that at that meeting, Mate was convinced under pressure from locals to get the Strojan family removed from the village and to promise locals that the Strojans would not return. Media also criticized the police for being unable to handle the Ambrus protests safely and professionally. On Tuesday, November 28th, a group of Slovenian intellectuals urged Prime Minister Jansa to dismiss Mate over his handling of the issue saying that he assisted in a "violent deportation" and violated the constitution.

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THE NEXT CHAPTER FOR THE STROJANS
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¶12. (C) With the Ljubljana plan off track and local municipalities in the southeastern region of Dolenjska opposing the return of the Strojan family, the government appears to be at a standstill in finding a solution. Appearing on television on Sunday, November 26th, Minister Zver maintained that there is enough tolerance and good will

in Slovenia to find a solution, but said that a real solution will take more time. However, some Roma community leaders wonder if any municipality in Slovenia will willingly accept the Strojans given their criminal reputation.

¶13. (C) The government avoided another potentially disastrous face off when Roma leaders decided to cancel a Ljubljana protest calling for participation from 2,000 Roma (the event was originally planned for November 21, then changed to November 27 before ultimately being canceled). President of the Slovenian Roma Association Horvat told PolOff that he did not support the idea of a protest, that such events "only harm the Strojan family," and that he was working to convince local Roma leaders in Dolenjska to permanently drop the idea.

¶14. (U) Media report that the government will look for an interim solution in a government-owned home for the winter, and then build a home on a permanent location in the spring. According to Prime Minister Janez Jansa, the GoS will continue what he calls a "massive effort" to find a suitable location for the permanent resettlement of the Strojan family.

¶15. (C) COMMENT. As tensions continue to boil and international authorities continue to criticize the situation (a second New York Times article appeared on November 26th and supermodel Naomi Campbell condemned the treatment of Roma during a visit to Ljubljana the same week), pressure will only continue to build. The fact that hyper-popular new Mayor of Ljubljana Zoran Jankovic was unable to broker a solution speaks volumes about the difficulty of the situation. Post expects that the government may retreat from the controversy by temporarily housing the family for the winter and putting off a permanent solution until 2007. End Comment.

ROBERTSON